A Comparative Look at Civil-Military Relations: Clarifying Expectations and Assumptions

It is increasingly common for the humanitarian and military communities to occupy the same working space. Whether either side sees this as desirable is not necessarily the question. What are significant are the institutional and individual approaches to this reality.

In theory, it is clear that some degree of cooperative involvement in training, planning, and information exchange is critical as a means of avoiding misunderstandings and dealing with institutional prejudices. In practice, accomplishing this requires that the respective communities have a clear sense of each other's operating assumptions and cultures.

Humanitarian and military institutional concerns will often differ significantly, even when these two groups are working in the same environment. These differences acquire special significance when they lead to hostile attitudes and behavior and erroneous assumptions. However, important distinctions need to be made in considering the circumstances we are referring to in this discussion of humanitarian and military concerns.

Where the military is present as part of a peacekeeping initiative (and thereby ostensibly a neutral entity), its presence is seen in a different light than in the case of a humanitarian intervention responding to a man-made crisis, as in Somalia. In Somalia, the military, initially there for humanitarian reasons, came to be seen as a belligerent, taking sides and therefore becoming a political actor.

During an occupation, as in Iraq, the situation can be even more complicated. Then, the role of the military, as seen by the populace and by humanitarian organizations, is constantly changing in response to events. A difficulty arises in that the military is often concentrating on the immediate objective at hand. This focus may override what the civilian community sees as its priorities. Additionally, some may perceive the work of the humanitarian community as actually extending the conflict.

On the other hand, during the response to a natural disaster, the reaction to military involvement is generally highly favorable. The military's special advantage in logistics, for example, is heavily relied on to assist in the rapid delivery of aid over potentially long distances and into otherwise inaccessible areas. In this case, humanitarian organizations have fewer concerns about the role of the military in providing immediate relief. Natural disasters play no favorites and non-governmental organizations, local structures, and the military often function as a team.

The following comparison is intended to assist in clarifying expectations and assumptions that get in the way of effective communication between the military and civilian organizations. It is an attempt to capture the concerns and interests of the respective communities. The challenge is to find, to the extent possible, areas of common concerns

and mutually reinforcing actions. The goal is to devise strategies for military and civilian actors that do not compromise their fundamental views on roles and mandates but which enable all sides to function as effectively as possible in the interest of those being served.

Leadership during Conflict or Civil Strife

NGO Views and Behavior

From the NGO perspective, leadership, to the extent it is seen as required or desirable by the community on the ground, may reflect the lead agency sectoral approach and not a command-and-control relationship. This approach is increasingly taken by the United Nations as well. Leadership may also be a function of presence, resources, and accommodations resulting from a concern with security. In some circumstances, the determination on which NGO takes a leading role may be connected to variables such as experience in the area, staffing levels, and relations with the local community.

Military Views and Behavior

Who is in charge is a fundamental concern for the military. Overall responsibility (in terms of the area of responsibility) is essentially the result of institutional imperatives based on the primary mission objectives. Effectiveness is very much related to a chain of command, which is imbued in military culture, but can also be personality driven. However, clear delineations of roles, responsibilities, and unity of command are viewed as necessary in order to ensure mission success. In those cases where the military objective is either planned to or results in a need to include humanitarian assistance, decision-making need not necessarily take into account considerations of civilian expertise or previous arrangements with the local community.

Public Expectations

NGO Views and Behavior

For NGOs, public expectations take more than one form and are closely related to the source of their funding. In the minds of the public, the role of relief organizations is pretty straightforward. They exist to save lives, assist the needy, and demonstrate the humanitarian values of the communities from which they come. The public generally looks at relief agencies as an extension of their need to ameliorate the suffering of others. This support takes many forms, from cash donations to direct provision of material aid.

NGOs, however, may require the support of a variety of donors. The larger the crisis, the more dependent they may become on a broad base of donor support. Donors will follow different approaches. Ideally, NGOs would prefer funds that have no strings attached. That way they can make decisions based solely on their own professional judgments. Many donors, including governments, will place tight controls on expenditures primarily for purposes of accountability, however. Thus, although NGOs' actions are based on

their mission statements, the same NGO may act differently in various humanitarian missions, depending on the funding available for a particular operation.

Military Views and Behavior

The military also has a mixed constituency. This constituency does not, however, see the military as primarily concerned with providing humanitarian assistance. A recent Department of Defense directive requires that the armed services include stability operations, which can include peacekeeping, as a core mission. That said, the mantra that the military exists primarily to "fight and win our nation's wars" permeates the military as well as the minds of the public. On the other hand, in times of large-scale disasters, there is frequently an expectation that the array of resources available to the military will and should be tasked to respond.

A difficulty lies in how much preparation is possible by the military for humanitarian missions. Military training objectives are clearly different from those of humanitarian agencies. Public expectations may therefore put the military in what can seem like a contradictory position.

Information or Intelligence

NGO Views and Behavior

NGOs see information as a tool for improving program implementation and planning. In this sense, it is clearly distinct from intelligence, with its connotation of military application. Information is also related to training objectives in the establishing of standards and communities of practice. Its value, in these terms, is its objective character and the expectation that information should be of value to any service provider. Its application must be consistent with the tenets of the various codes of conduct governing the provision of humanitarian assistance. Standardization of terms is necessary for the effective exchange of information between the humanitarian and military communities.

Military Views and Behavior

In military parlance, information and intelligence are seen as virtually synonymous. Both terms are applied to the tools for tactical and strategic decision-making and action. Information, therefore, is deemed essential to providing an advantage over an opposing group. This position leads to an incentive for the military to see humanitarians working in their area of operations as an appendage to military objectives.

 The different ways that the military and NGOs use information and intelligence frequently creates difficulties in even discussing this issue. NGOs, therefore, should be willing to share the information resulting from their unique access to populations and areas.

Security in the Field: Responsibilities and Concerns

NGO Views and Behavior

The concept of security is closely tied to staff protection, protection of beneficiaries and the concept of "humanitarian space." This last is defined in different ways, but a fundamental statement turns upon the need to have a safe and secure environment in which to do humanitarian work. Further, the word "protection" has more than one understanding. It applies to physical protection in the sense described above, and also to legal protection defined by humanitarian norms and international law.

Many NGOs rely upon a strategy of their acceptance by the local community to significantly contribute to security. Their awareness of the perceptions of the local community will often lead NGOs to avoid contact with the military. Taken to an extreme, this can often be the reason NGOs will leave formal humanitarian meetings if attended by the military. The best contact with NGOs is often away from their compounds and out of the public view.

Military Views and Behavior

Here again, the military view includes a focus on the means by which security is established and control of the requirements for maintaining security. NGOs rarely establish security procedures beyond maintaining the tools of self-protection, such as warden networks, secure housing, staff training, and issues of safe access. The military does not take this--what may be described as a--neutral approach. For the military, operational plans assume the imposition of security as part of mission objectives.

Guidelines for Action

NGO Views and Behavior

NGOs prefer to respond to situations in terms of established assessment methodologies, looking primarily at humanitarian needs. This also reflects a need to achieve the most effective outcome with limited resources. Relying on information derived from assessments has often created the impression that humanitarian organizations are simply dragging their feet. On the other hand, NGOs recognize that there are occasions when immediate response is the only option, such as in the case of the tsunami.

As equally important aspect of humanitarian missions is the aim of "doing no harm." This concept states that NGO activities should be designed and implemented so that beneficiaries are not, in the long term, disadvantaged by these activities.

Military Views and Behavior

Military missions are usually—but not exclusively--initiated by threats to national security or interests. The mission and its objectives are paramount. Factors going into shaping and planning are necessarily focused on success. The military, therefore, is more

task-oriented than NGOs. The military's view of its role is deliberately limited by rules of engagement, which are based on clear-cut victory when possible.

Traditional training is designed to achieve the above aims and is, therefore, of limited value for any informed response to circumstances not obtaining in the same environment.

The overarching legal role of the Geneva conventions suggests comparisons with the similar NGO criteria establishing rules of behavior. A distinction exists in the nature of reaction to the constraints affecting application of these standards. For the military, rules influencing behavior are generally seen in relation to conflict situations whose outcome is defined in terms of victory or defeat. The rules affecting NGOs relate to an impartial and neutral response to need.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON WORKING, PLANNING, AND TRAINING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY

General Observations

A fundamental concern is the degree to which NGO participation informs training and planning as a guide to make training outcomes as realistic as possible. For example, the use of NGOs exclusively as role players falls well short of meeting their desire to make more useful contributions to training. This singular utilization is seen by them as an indication of a lack of understanding of their activities and experience. It is important to recognize that for NGOs, this is not the best use of either their knowledge or the limited time available for activities outside of their normal work. This use also assumes that the scenario being acted out by the role players (often prepared without NGO input) reflects real-life situations.

Thought should be given to NGO personnel participating in after-action reviews when the opportunity arises. This would allow feedback in an open forum and contribute developing ways to avoid polarization of positions.

The training of observer controls is a useful way to integrate the perspective of the humanitarian community. This also serves the purpose of establishing the sense that NGO participation is a critical part of successful training exercises.

Specific Recommendations

In order to encourage NGO participation in training exercises and other activities, it must be understood that their definition of added value turns upon recognition of the following:

1. The priorities of the humanitarian community as reflected in codes of conduct and technical guidelines, such as the Sphere Project, must be recognized and acknowledged. This does not mean that they always have to be accepted.

2. It is important to recognize that the issue of cost effectiveness as it relates to the impact on beneficiaries is of fundamental importance to NGOs . They often see military involvement as excessively expensive and not always efficient. The demonstration of a willingness to step aside where appropriate is critical to establishing credibility.

3. As far as is practical, agreement on common use of language and standardization of terms should be encouraged. For example, it is important to describe in common terms what each participant does. It's imperative to avoid confusion based on differing understanding of terms of reference when the NGOs and the military occupy the same space and where missions may overlap.

4. The independence and civilian nature of humanitarian assistance should be emphasized at all times. This requires maintaining the distinctions between NGOs and the military in the areas of identities, functions, and roles of humanitarian personnel.   The military should expect NGOs to be sensitive to matters of the perception created, for example, by military personnel working in civilian clothing while doing relief work.

5. The establishment of liaison arrangements and clear lines of communication at the earliest possible stage is a priority. This contact should be encouraged at as many levels as possible to promote the timely and regular exchange of information. This also applies to activities in the field through use of the CMOC, HOC, or similar structures.